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EP 1195184 A
EP 1113839 A
US 20020165022 A
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(71) Applicant(s):
Simon Richard Daniel
Abbotswood, Rowhills, FARNHAM, Surrey, GU9 9AU, United Kingdom

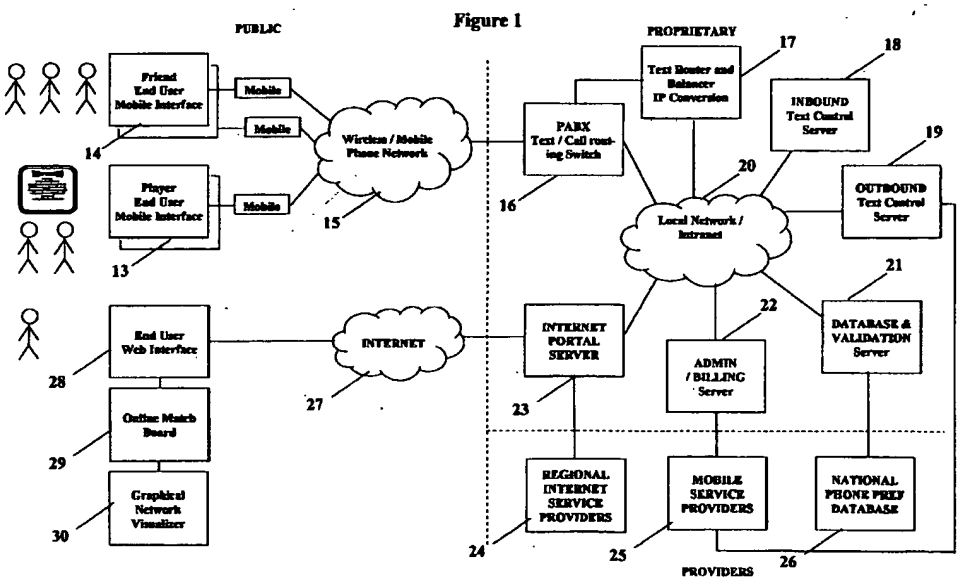
(72) Inventor(s):
Simon Richard Daniel

(74) Agent and/or Address for Service:
Simon Richard Daniel
52 Oakington Road, Maidavale, LONDON, W9 2DH, United Kingdom

(54) Abstract Title: **An online dating referral system**

(57) A dating system for matching people by referrals implemented on a computer system that includes at least one server connected to a network for automating on-line or text messages between participants, at least one server for hosting an on-line access portal, at least one server for hosting participant scores and awarding prizes by means of a lottery algorithm, a plurality of local clients connectivity to a mobile telephone network, a plurality of end user client mobile interfaces, a database of user information and permissions and charging, a plurality of disposable facilitation and instruction game boards of suitable marketing material, a first order matching process of game rules, a second order algorithmic matching process derived degrees of network separation, a visualizer to enable participants to view their relationship network, and a team game board for larger group play with instruction cards and game pieces and dice.

Figure 1



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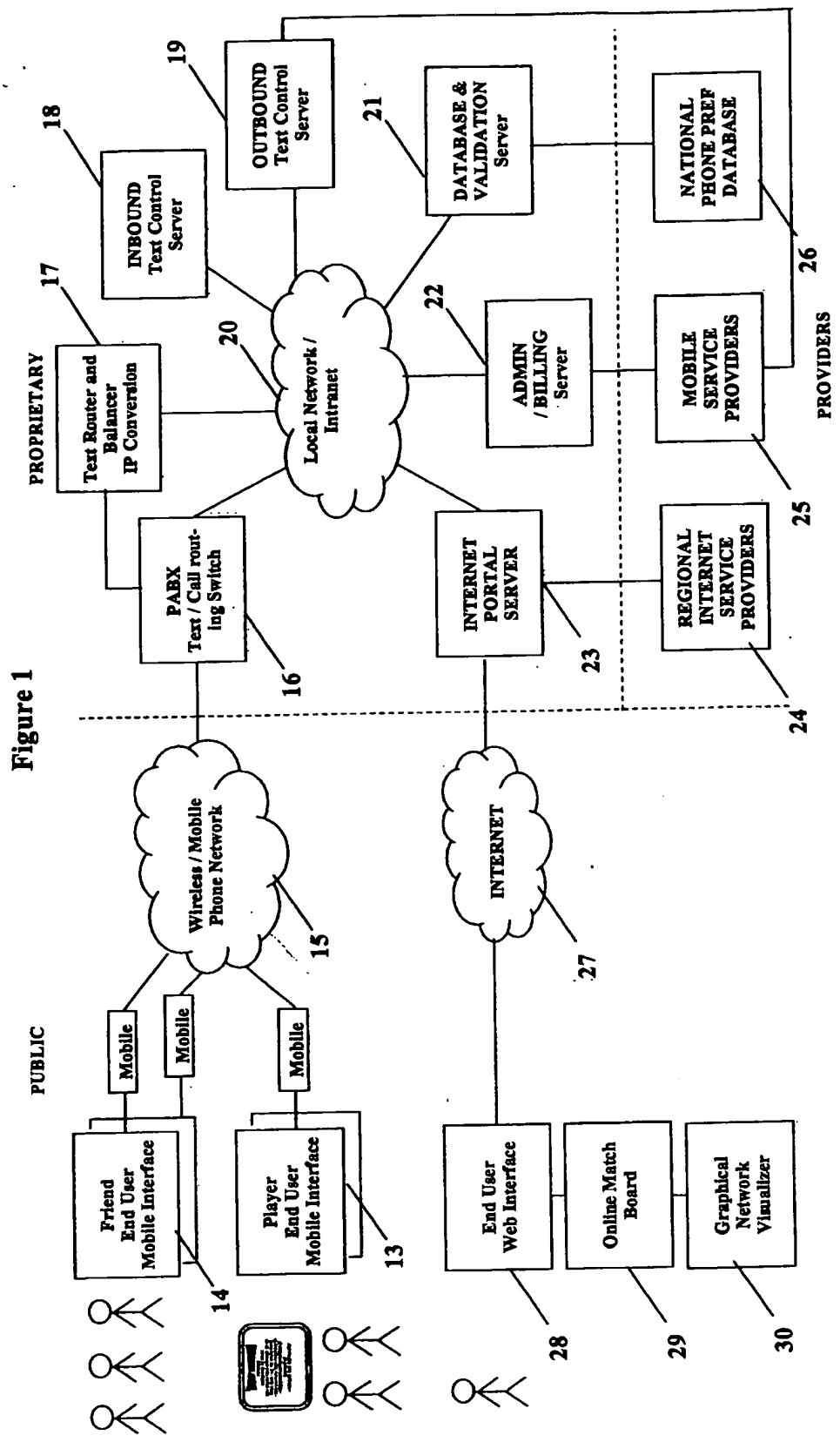
PUBLIC
PROPRIETARY
PROVIDERS
Friend End User Mobile Interface
Player End User Mobile Interface
End User Web Interface
Online Match Board
Graphical Network Visualizer
Mobile
Mobile
Mobile
Wireless / Mobile Phone Network
INTERNET
PABX Text / Call routing Switch
Text Router and Balancer IP Conversion
INBOUND Text Control Server
OUTBOUND Text Control Server
Local Network / Intranet
INTERNET PORTAL SERVER
ADMIN /BILLING Server
DATABASE & VALIDATION Server
NATIONAL PHONE PREF DATABASE
MOBILE SERVICE PROVIDERS
REGIONAL INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS
13
14
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Figure 1

Figure 2A

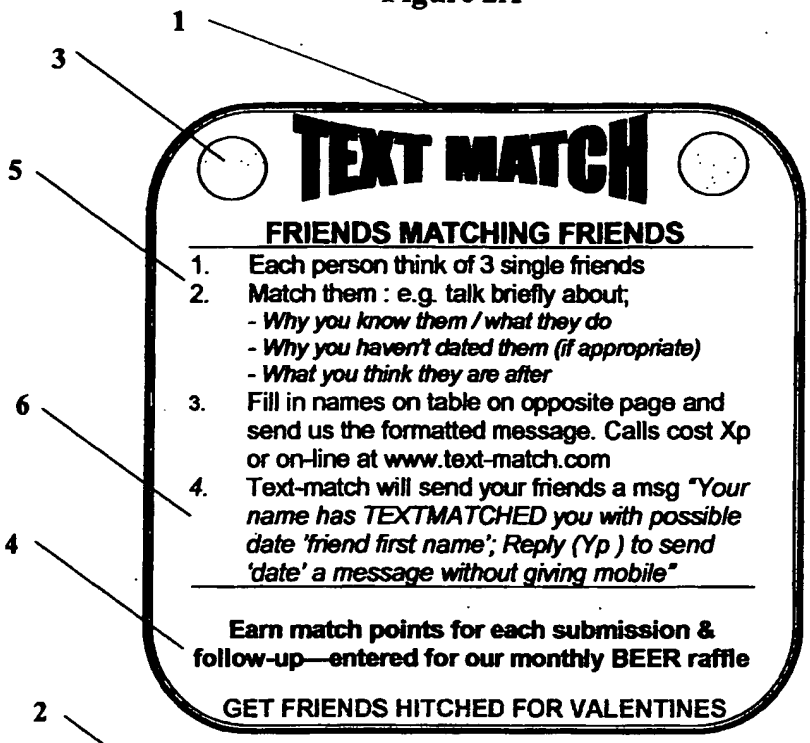


Figure 2B

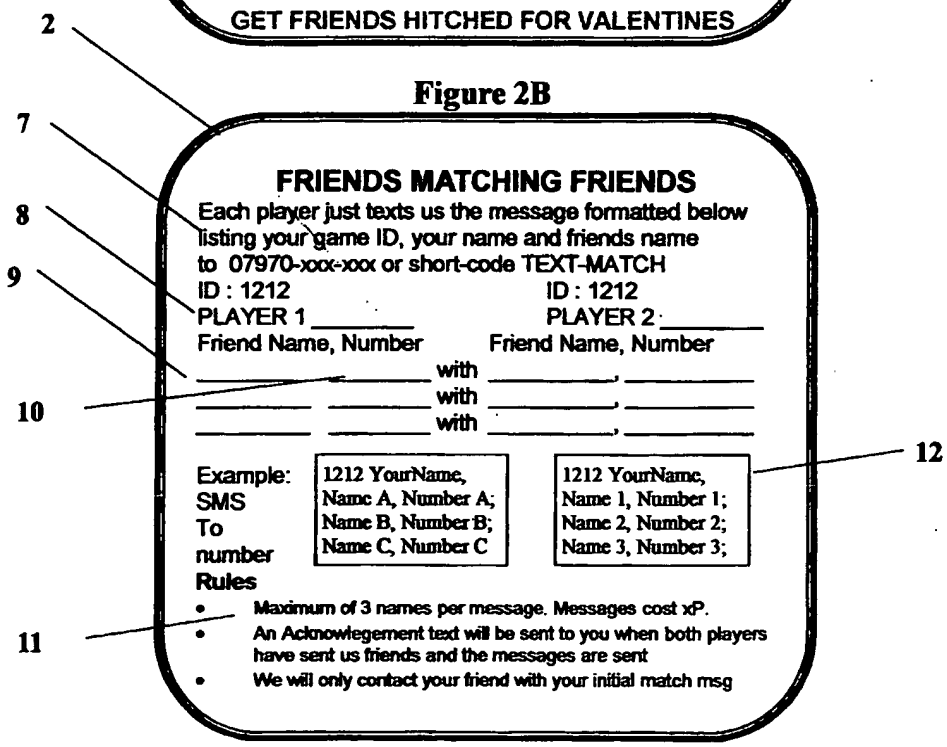
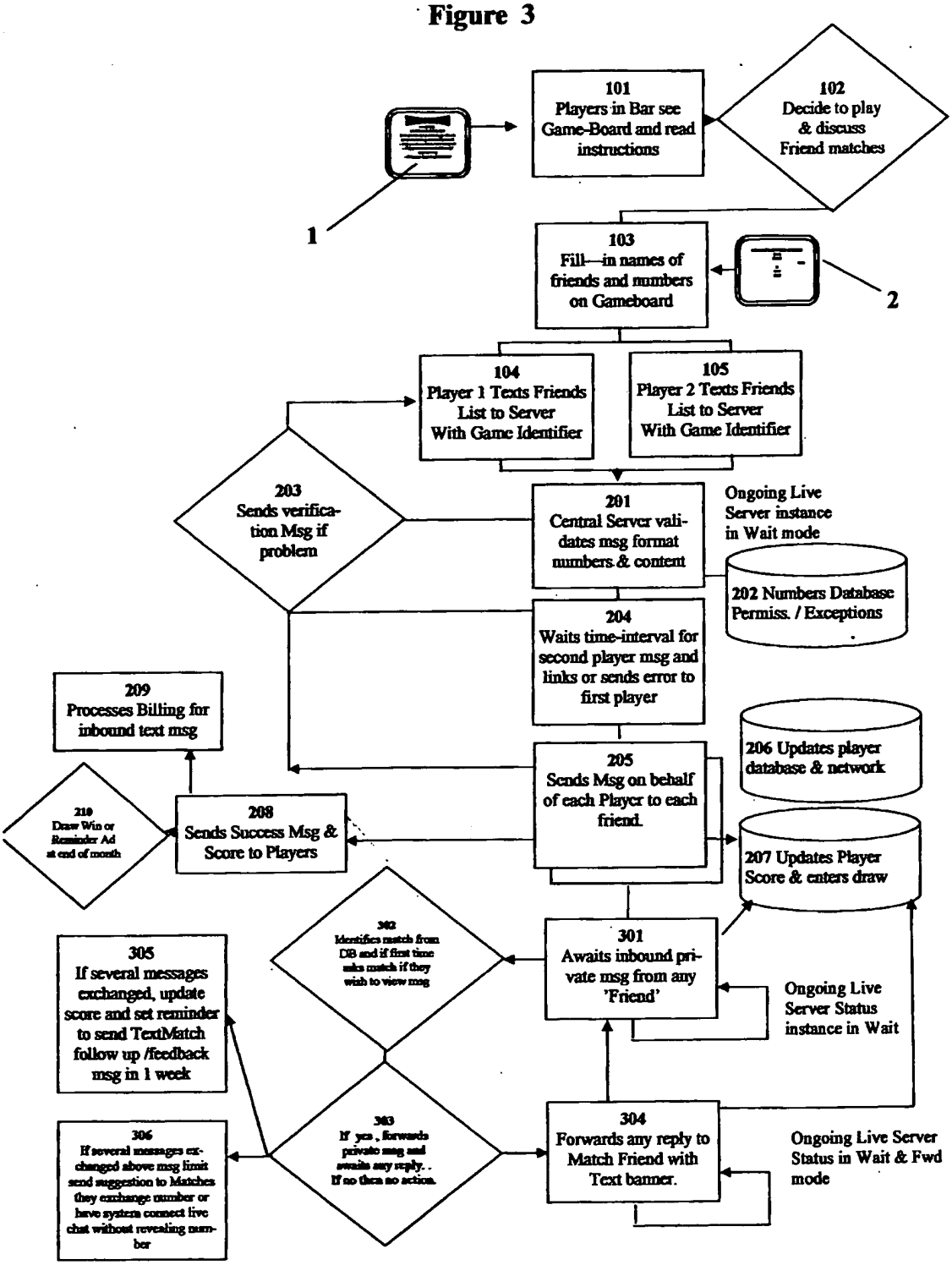


Figure 3


101
Players in Bar see Game-Board and read instructions
102
Decide to play & discuss Friend matches
1
103
Fill—in names of friends and numbers on Gameboard
2
104
Player 1 Texts Friends List to Server With Game Identifier
105
Player 2 Texts Friends List to Server With Game Identifier
203
Sends verification Msg if problem
201
Central Server validates msg format numbers & content
Ongoing Live Server instance in Wait mode
202 Numbers Database Permiss. / Exceptions
204
Waits time-interval for second player msg and links or sends error to first player
209
Processes Billing for inbound text msg
206 Updates player database & network
205
Sends Msg on behalf of each Player to each friend.
210
Draw Win or Reminder Ad at end of month
208
Sends Success Msg & Score to Players
207 Updates Player Score & enters draw
302
Identifies match from DB and if first time asks match if they wish to view msg
301
Awaits inbound private msg from any 'Friend'
Ongoing Live Server Status instance in Wait
305
If several messages exchanged, update score and set reminder to send TextMatch follow up /feedback msg in 1 week
303
If yes, forwards private msg and awaits any reply. . If no then no action.
304
Forwards any reply to Match Friend with Text banner.
Ongoing Live Server Status in Wait & Fwd mode
306
If several messages exchanged above msg limit send suggestion to Matches they exchange number or have system connect live chat without revealing number

ON-LINE AND TEXT REFERRAL BASED DATING GAME AND SERVICE FOR MATCHING FRIENDS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1) Reservation of Copyright

The disclosure of this patent document contains material that is subject to copyright protection.

2) Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a system, process and method for providing a dating system and game to enable people to more easily make personal referrals of friends and arrange suitable matches and automate messages (such as mobile SMS/Text or e-mail) and exchanges, and through doing so accumulate points that entitle participants to be entered into draws for prizes. The system is largely preferred to be implemented on a computer system that includes at least one server connected to a network for automating on-line or text messages between participants, at least one server for hosting an on-line access portal for game members, at least one server for hosting participant scores and awarding prizes by means of a lottery algorithm, a plurality of local clients, connectivity to a mobile telephone network, a plurality of end-user client mobile interfaces, a database of user information containing contact data, permissions and charging details, a plurality of disposable facilitation and instruction game-boards such as a could be printed by way of example onto a beer mat or suitable marketing material, a first order matching process of game rules, a second order algorithmic matching process derived from system calculated degrees of network separation, an online interface visualizer to enable participants to view their relationship network graphically, and a team game board for larger group play with instruction cards and game pieces and dice.

3) Description of the Prior Art

There are numerous examples of prior art that teach various methods of match-making using on-line internet based portals or phone servers that enable participants to select preferences and see or hear an assortment of participants claiming to match those preferences and to facilitate anonymous or direct contact between participants by means of instant messaging, e-mails or mobile text/sms correspondence. Similarly various examples of network dating events and 'speed-dating' mechanisms exist whereby participants turn up at an event, or are pre-filtered by criteria to attend an event, and meet other participants. However, such examples are generally impersonal and rely on very accurate filtering and honesty by participants and can be out of place and less accessible in various cultures. Other than traditional match-making by means of conversation or arranging dinner-parties, few examples provide a mechanism for more honest and qualified referrals by friends with instantly accessible supporting technology to facilitate automation and message exchange whilst they have that friend in mind, neither do they combine the process with an opportunity to participate in a game and accumulate points to win prizes. Furthermore such system could be adopted virally

across a population and enable rapid friend matching and be combined with a product or seasonal promotion.

By way of example U.S. Patent 6, 061,681 by Collins discloses a traditional on-line and phone dating model involving selected preferences and viewable pages revealing personal information, where participants come from anywhere in a population, with the system acting to help filter potential matches by means of information supplied by participants. W.O 201405 by Hancock discloses a people networking system for business and dating groups with filtering processes to identify interests or location and to send anonymous text messages with emphasis on providing geo-local services such as finding an available taxi/performance.

Legislation and excess internet marketing SPAM has reduced the effectiveness of anonymous emails and text messages changing marketing to become more permission based - requiring participants to pre-register or opt-in to services and in some case may ban or limit receipt of anonymous messages. Such legislation is more advanced where charging, games and prizes are involved, but few Dating models have been developed to take account of registration or the benefit of gaming mechanisms. Furthermore no prior art is believed to disclose the overall benefit of friend referrals which are more honest, better filtered and tailored and also are acceptable to be sent automatically by a third party acting as a service provider in compliance with legislation.

To the best of the applicant's knowledge, the prior art, whilst suggesting some features and numerous variations relevant to on-line, phone and text dating and people networks in general, the prior art has not disclosed some of the highly advantageous features of the present invention discussed herein.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The dating system and game of the present invention relates to a process for referral based dating whereby friends are prompted to identify suitable matches between their friends and use the service to easily send e-mail or text/SMS messages on their behalf and to automate messages and exchanges between potential matches, whilst at the same time providing a mechanism for accumulating points and prizes. In a preferred embodiment the dating system and game is implemented on a computer system that includes at least one server connected to a network for automating on-line or text messages between participants, at least one server for hosting an on-line access portal for game members, at least one server for hosting participant scores and awarding prizes by means of a lottery algorithm, a plurality of local clients, connectivity to a mobile telephone network, a plurality of end-user client mobile interfaces, a database of user information containing contact data, permissions and charging details, a plurality of disposable facilitation and instruction game-boards such as a could be printed in a preferred embodiment onto a beer mat or on other suitable marketing material or game cards, a first order matching process of game rules, a second order algorithmic matching process derived from system calculated degrees of network separation, an online interface visualizer to enable participants to view their relationship network graphically, and a team game board for larger group play with instruction cards and game pieces and dice.

The process of first order referral matching in a preferred embodiment requests participants (usually in pairs) to identify and share details to match friends they know who are single/unattached by

means of said disposable facilitation aid (such as a beer mat containing rules, ice-breaker questions and blanks for friend names and numbers) or by said on-line access portal, and then proceed to enter their friend contact details into the access portal or onto the facilitation aid and then typed via a client mobile interface such as a mobile phone, where said system would then automate on behalf of the participant a text message or email introduction between potential matches, and provides a mechanism for enabling matches to communicate without revealing contact in such a manner as if a match sent a message to their suggested match they would receive the first time a message referring to the original friend recommendation and asking if they want to accept a message from their match.

A particular feature is that the system would send a text message on behalf of the friend listing the senders name along with the suggested date/match name, which avoids the recipient receiving an anonymous/unauthorized message. The recipient could then make their own judgement as to how well or how much trust they have in their friend, the timing of the message, and whether they already know the name of the suggested match, and can choose to send back a message to the match directly without revealing details. Such messages could be chargeable and enable the control server to accumulate points to the original game participant each time a message is exchanged between matches.

Said game-board or facilitation aid is ideally printed on a beer mat, perhaps in combination with a promotion on types of prizes awarded monthly, and would contain a table of formatted blanks and rules on how "Friends can match Friends", and questions to ask such as 'Think of 3 single people you know", "Discuss why you know them, what they do, why you've not dated them (if appropriate), and what you think they are looking for". Game Participants would then match them with suitable friends, and complete name and contact number details on the formatted game-board. By way of example such a board could contain a unique ID at the top, a space for one recommender name on the left, and their friend on the right, with 3 table slots below for names and numbers on each side. An online window would have a similar configuration. The board would have a graphic at the base showing an example of a formatted message along with the dial-number and potentially a picture showing the format of the message the suggested match would receive. One player would text the ID and the names/numbers as formatted on the game card to this number. The other player would then do the same for their column for their friends. The system would automatically capture the senders mobile, and could use this as registration and establish a suitable ID for that user should they wish to do further matches later, as well as provide a response text confirming receipt and sending of three matches and their initial score.

A significant feature of this approach is that the rules can be provided simply on a marketing promotion such as a beer mat and used as part of a product launch campaign. Participants playing the game are provided with an 'ice-breaker' trigger for talking about relationships and friends they know which can itself be revealing. The main value of this simple approach is that the action is immediate if they think of a suitable match they can send a message instantly to them via the system.

As more people within a friends community play in the dating game – either as match-maker or as suggested matched, the system would develop an extended database (subject to local privacy laws), showing how the network of numbers and contacts relate to each other. Subject to access restrictions and data privacy, members could potentially use the web-site to view a visual representation of their

friend network in addition to their overall score. A system algorithm could be employed to provide additional match-making options for the participant to select, such as by looking at multiple referrals to the same person, or frequency of referrals and contact history.

In the preferred embodiment game participants accumulate points each time they submit a recommended match, with further points awarded based on the number of contacts a match makes. Equally they could receive bonus points if their matches move forward in a relationship and text back to the main server an update – which could be enabled by the system sending a chasing message within a few weeks of the original message. In a preferred lottery model, points would purchase virtual raffle units in a monthly draw which if picked could be translated into gifts – by way of example a sponsored prizes featured as part of the promotion on the game-card. Alternatively prizes could consist of discounts or promotions.

An additional benefit is that the system could build up a virtual network model for cultures and groups if combined with age and other data optionally collected via an online portal, and could subject to data privacy laws, have overall statistical and aggregate data value for marketing purposes and research.

A further embodiment could extend the game to a physical game-board suitable for usage at network dating events or in larger groups, whereby in one example local or temporary mobile numbers are used or identifier codes by using a local wireless network such as 802.11b or Wireless, with game players meeting several people and collecting facts and then matching them with other people they know or people at the meeting. Such a game-board could contain prompter cards and suggested questions to ask participants or dice to enable random mixes and matches.

The overall system therefore serves to encourage and reward the individual skill of match-making your friends by providing a fun interactive game which is easily understood and introduced by means of a simple game-board, easily shared virally with others, suitable for combining with a product promotion, and supported by technology that easily and conveniently automates sending introduction messages and manages anonymous communication between parties.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above and other objects, features of the present invention are further described in the detailed description which follows, with reference to the drawings, which serve to illustrate a non-limiting exemplary embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 1 shows a schematic overview of the dating and game system architecture

FIG.2A shows an example of a disposable game board or facilitation aid with game rules and FIG 2B the reverse containing a table for formatted message.

FIG. 3 shows a process flow through the referral matchmaking system.

DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMODIMENT

The preferred embodiment of the invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings herein:

Referring to FIG. 1 which provides a schematic overview of the system architecture consisting of a proprietary side containing a network and servers, a Public side for user access via Mobile and web interfaces and a provider side for supporting network infrastructure for call-routing/billing and communication. A player accesses the system via an End User Interface 13 and mobile phone connected via a wireless network 15 to the systems main PABX switch 16. Similarly a friend would receive a message via the network 15 on their End User Interface 14. A Player may also choose to access the system via a Web Interface 28 connected via the Internet 27 and use an online match board 29 to enter Friends names and numbers for matches. A Player may also access a Graphical Network Visualizer 30 showing their relationships and contact history. The main parts of the system infrastructure consists of a local network or intranet 20, a main PABX switch 16, a Text Router/Balancer server 17, an Inbound Text control server 18, an Outbound Text control server 19, a database validation server 21, an Admin and Billing Server 22 (which would also handle any prize draw/lottery), and an Internet Portal Server 23. These functions might optionally be combined on fewer servers or more depending on concurrent user volume demands or might be partly provided by custom hardware or advanced text router switches 16 and 17. Similarly some of these functions might be provided by third-party service providers for additional web hosting 24 or mobile services 25, by way of example this might include sending of bulk text messages at the end of a month. The database validation might connect to a national database 26 or service for validating phone preferences.

Referring now to Figures 2A and 2B, which shows an example of a disposable game board shaped in this example as a beer mat or coaster and containing a front cover 1 which sets out game instructions 5 and example formatted Match message 6 along with sponsor logo 3 and promotion information 4. A reverse side 2 contains text instructions 7 and a unique game identifier 8 and table for writing down friend names 9 and friends numbers 10, along with an example formatted message 12 and rules/charging information 11. The unique game identifier 8 is used to keep the messages between players simple and short and to connect two players sending messages to the server within a space of a few minutes. If no pair of messages are received or if there are uneven names, or if numbers fail to register or are stored on an exceptions database, then an error or verification message will be returned to the sender. Once outbound messages are successfully sent to each friend, a success message will be sent to each game player, listing their current score, and reminding them of the on-line web-site which will be triggered from the game identifier 8 and mobile number should they wish to follow up or send further matches on-line.

Referring now to FIG 3 which shows a process flow through the referral matchmaking system and a schematic of the supporting computer based processing logic. A pair of players see the game board 1 and read the instructions, step 101, and decide to play a game, step 102, where they think of and discuss potential friends and fill in their names and contact numbers, step 103, on the game-board 2 before each submits text messages to the server, steps 104-105, listing in a preferred format: the game identifier 8, their name and their friends names and contact numbers separated by commas. The central server validates the names, step 201, and checks for errors in format, missing

information, compares against any exceptions on a database 202, and verifies that the name fields do not contain unsuitable text. Any problems are reported via text message to the sender, step 203. The system waits a short time-interval, step 204, until the second player submits a message and performs a similar validation 201 or sends an error to Player 1 if no message is received. This inbound text 104-105 will be chargeable as notified on the game instructions and will cover the cost of outbound messages to all game participants or error message if appropriate. The system will then match the names between players using the game identifier 8 and send messages to each of the recommended matches step 205 on behalf of the players and update databases 206 and 207 with network relationships and scoring. In a preferred embodiment this message may have a format similar to *"Your friend 'player name 1234' has TEXTMATCHED you with possible date 'friend first name'; Reply (at Yp) to send this 'date' a private msg without revealing your mobile"*. In this example 1234 would indicate the last 4 digits of their Friends player mobile number in order to reduce misuse of the system by people claiming to be other friends. The game identifier will be a number of order of 5 digits in the preferred model and unique to each printed game-board 1 and will cycle and expire every few days after usage. Optionally the system might include a Match ID, should the friend need to communicate with multiple recommended matches within a similar time-interval.

The system will then send, step 208, a message to each original matchmaker player with their score, update billing details to their service provider, step 209, and enter them into a rolling monthly draw, step 207. On a preferred monthly basis the system will hold an electronic lottery, step 210, weighted based on scores each player held, such that a player with twice the score as another will stand approximately twice the likelihood of obtaining a prize. The system will send a message to the player if they are successful or send a reminder advert about the service listing their score at the end of the month, and potentially give the player an option to carry forward their score to the next month.

The system, step 301, will await any inbound messages from friends wishing to pass a message to their potential match, on receipt the system will, step 302, validate this message and look-up from the database the match directly using contact history or via a Match ID. If this is the first response contact the system will send a message to the match asking if they wish to receive the message, if yes, step 303, it will forward the message and then facilitate exchange of messages, step 304. This process will repeat as the matches continue to correspond until such time as a system limit or billing limit is reached, step 305, when the system will update a message to prompt the participants after a fixed time interval, and step 306, suggest they exchange numbers or emails directly or connected as a live call. The system would use a combination of message stamps, caller-id for respondents, current contact history and optionally a match ID, to enable multiple messages between multiple matches should a plurality of matches be received by an individual friend.

Although the invention is described and illustrated with reference to one preferred embodiment and arrangement of server and system architecture along with preferred game rules and computer process flow it is expressly understood that it is in no way limited to the disclosure of such a preferred embodiment, but is capable of numerous modifications within the scope of the claims.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A dating system and game for matching people by referrals implemented on a computer system for supporting on-line and text exchange comprising;

   A plurality of disposable facilitation game-boards;

   A first order matching process and game whereby Players identify friends they know and recommend matches between them or with friends of other Players;

   A system by which automated messages are sent to individual friends on behalf of each Player after submitting a recommendation to a central system;

   A central system comprising at least one server connected to the internet and at least one phone/text server connected to a mobile communication network, at least one switch and router to control inbound and outbound text messages, a plurality of local end-user client mobile interfaces and a plurality of local end-user client web interfaces, a permissions server and database for storing user information and managing charging, a lottery server for managing prizes and awards;

   A process for awarding scores to Players based on the volume of recommended matches made and the volume of correspondence between their recommended matches;

   A process of awarding prizes based on the proportional scores of players;

   A process for facilitating anonymous exchange of on-line and text messages between recommended matches.

2. A dating system and game according to Claim 1 where said facilitation game-board is a disposable beer mat containing instructions and rules on one side, a unique game identifier and a formatted blank table for aiding accurate submission of a recommendation text to the system.

3. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-2 where said facilitation game-board is provided by an on-line portal interface comprising a formatted table and rules and validation scripts.

4. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-3 where said on-line portal enables players to view their scores, contact history, submit new recommendations, and view a visual map showing their overall relationship network.

5. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-4 where a second order matching process uses data accumulated over multiple games to suggest to the recommender

alternative matches based on network relationships using a proximity or degrees of separation rule.

6. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-5 where a unique game identifier is printed on each facilitation aid and used by each Player to simplify the entering of names into the system and used by the system to match messages sent by other players within a similar time-interval.

7. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-6 which enables a match to correspond with another match in an anonymous manner via text messages, or via a unique id, or to be connected to a live-phone call or to refuse or block further correspondence

8. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-7 where prizes are awarded based on a lottery of all players, where each score equates to a number of virtual units in the lottery

9. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-8 used in combination with an overall product or seasonal promotion

10. A dating system and game according to Claims 1-9 where charges are made for inbound and outbound text messages at suitable points.

11. A dating system and game according to Claim 1-10 where a larger game-board is provided suitable for usage at a network dating event or with a larger group of players and provides cue-cards with suggested questions, dice and tables.

12. A dating system and game according to Claim 1-11 in combination with a local wireless network at an event or meeting space.

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Application No: GB0329482.4 **Examiner:** Mrs Margaret Phillips

Claims searched: 1-12 **Date of search:** 20 October 2004

Patents Act 1977: Search Report under Section 17

Documents considered to be relevant:

Category	Relevant to claims	Identity of document and passage or figure of particular relevance
Y	1 at least	EP 1113639 A (NOKIA) Whole document
Y	1 at least	EP 1195184 A (UBALE et al) Whole document
Y	1 at least	US 2002/0165022 A (HIRAOKA) Whole document
Y	1 at least	GB 2195258 A (RANDOM THOUGHTS LIMITED) Whole document
Y	1 at least	www.aLoveLinksPlus.com/index.htm - updated 3 December 2003.

Categories:

X	Document indicating lack of novelty or inventive step	A	Document indicating technological background and/or state of the art.
Y	Document indicating lack of inventive step if combined with one or more other documents of same category.	P	Document published on or after the declared priority date but before the filing date of this invention.
&	Member of the same patent family	E	Patent document published on or after, but with priority date earlier than, the filing date of this application.

Field of Search:

Search of GB, EP, WO & US patent documents classified in the following areas of the UKC[W] :

A6H

Worldwide search of patent documents classified in the following areas of the IPC[07]

A63F

The following online and other databases have been used in the preparation of this search report

Online: EPODOC, WPI, JAPIO, Various Internet Sites